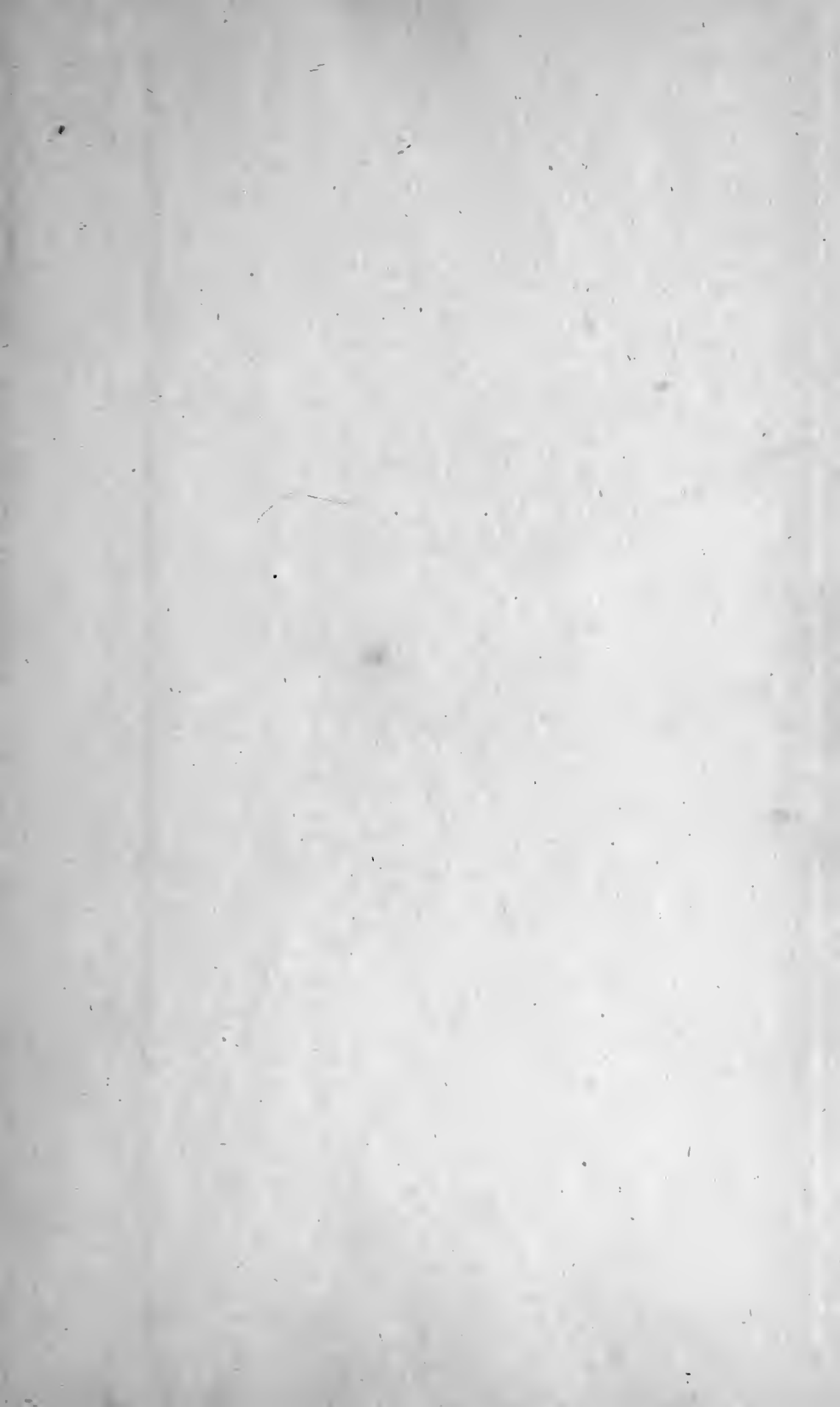


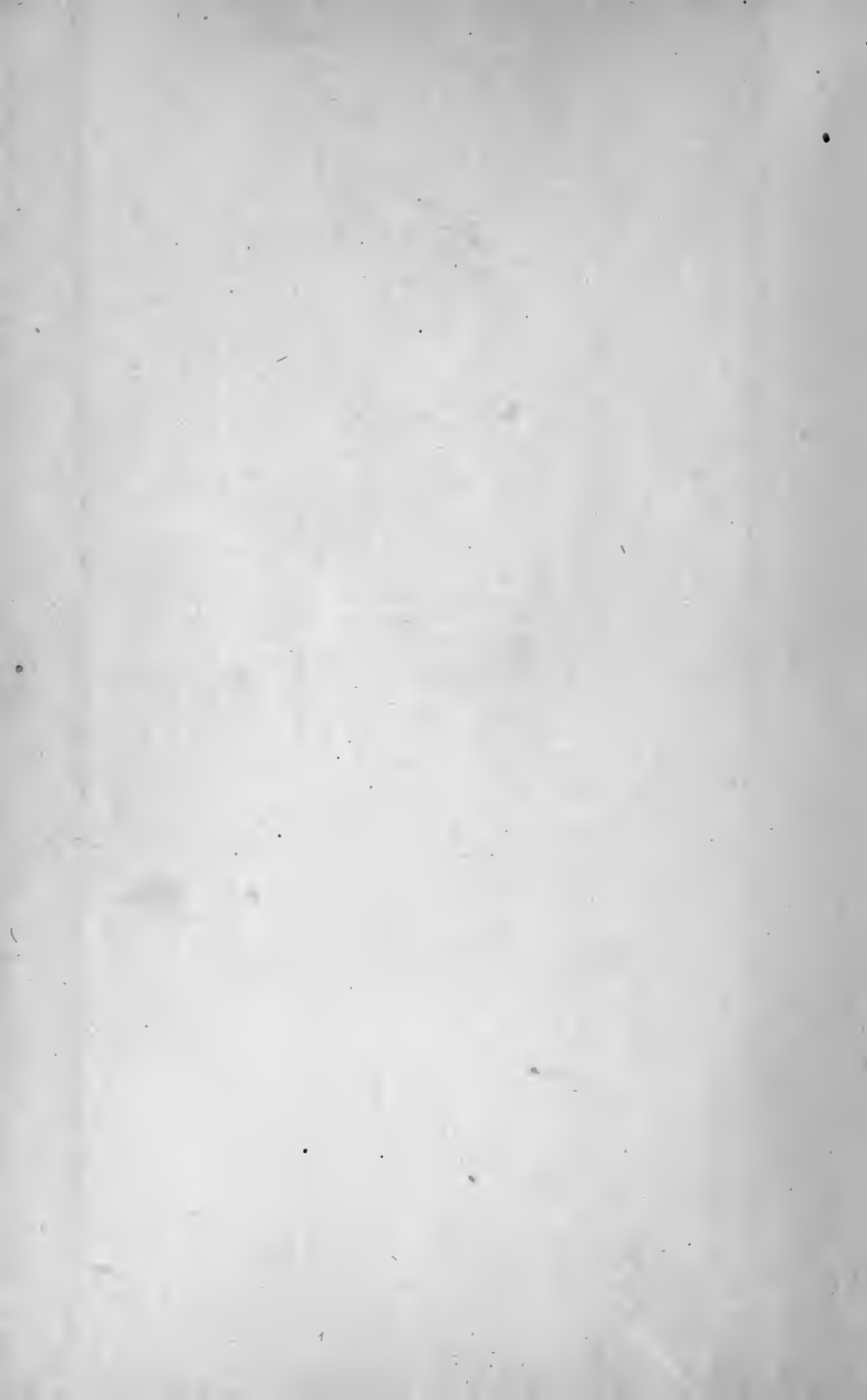
PR

A-220

D3







SORDELLO:

A HISTORY AND A POEM.

By CAROLINE H. DALL.



BOSTON:
ROBERTS BROTHERS.

1886.

PR 4220
.II 3



Copyright, 1886,
BY CAROLINE H. DALL.

UNIVERSITY PRESS:
JOHN WILSON AND SON, CAMBRIDGE.

7
3
2
3

NOTE.

THIS article was originally written in Canada between 1850 and 1855. It was drawn, so far as it is historic, from some old "Croniche," both printed and manuscript, deposited in the library of the Canadian Parliament, said to have belonged to one of the early Jesuit explorers. These perished afterward in a fire which destroyed the library.

The article was first prepared for a drawing-room lecture. Afterward, to satisfy some pupils, it was condensed and printed in a magazine in 1872. It is now reprinted as a tract for distribution, at the request of certain members of the Browning Society in England, and of Browning Clubs in this country, who probably would not want it so very much if they could see it beforehand!

I have yielded to the request because I feel that the poem is especially dear to its "maker," and that it holds a lesson much needed in these modern days.

When Browning rewrote it, he injured it; and I have allowed my old quotations from the first edition to stand, re-arranging his lines sometimes to throw out the meaning. His changes, however, are significant of the growth of his own nature.

For example, in the first edition we read, —

"Here is a soul, whom to affect
Nature has plied with all her means from trees
And flowers, e'en to the multitude;
And is it to be saved or no,
That soul?"

But in the last edition we read, —

"E'en to the multitude, *and these*
Decides he save or no?"

The movement of the lines turns on a new pivot, but one at last indestructible; so I preserve the later reading.

The body of the article was written before Browning had said a word in explanation of his purpose, or Longfellow had written one historic note.

The poem contains the history of a soul.

Browning's personality has stolen into it most effectively. It can never be popular, but all English scholars ought to understand his purpose in it, — a purpose which he candidly acknowledges by the running titles of his second edition.

No poem that he has written reminds me so forcibly of the lines of Elizabeth Barrett, —

“ Or from Browning some pomegranate, which, if cut deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within, blood tintured, of a veined humanity.”

Had there been any cordial response to it, I think he might have come out of his middle-age dream, and possibly instead of our poet we should have had a “maker of new men.”

CAROLINE HEALEY DALL.

Mar., 1886.
1667 31st Street,
WASHINGTON, D. C.

SORDELLO:

A HISTORY AND A POEM.

I.

SORDELLO, THE TROUBADOUR.

“WHO wills has heard Sordello’s story told,” yet not without some hard work; some diving into old and musty chronicles, the best American collection of which perished when the library of the Canadian Parliament was burned.

It was the audacity of genius only that dared found a poem on a history so obscure that no two writers can be found who call its hero by the same family name. Had Sordello, on the contrary, been an historic personage, stark and startling as Wellington himself, the din of political turmoil, the smoke of war, intrigue, conflicting houses and interests into which he was born, might have sued for explanation at the poet’s hand. It would even have helped a little had Browning only said, “Salinguerra and Taurello are the same man.”

In Aliprando’s fabulous “History of Milan” we find long stories of Sordello, borrowed, doubtless, from still older sources, and stealing out of his verses into the solemn Latin prose of Platina’s “History of Mantua.” There we are told that Sordello was born into the Visconti family, at Goïto, in Mantua, in 1189. A mere boy, he startled the world of letters by a poem called “Trésor.” That of arms did not open to him till he was twenty-five, when he distinguished himself, not only by bravery and

address, but by a dignity and grace of manner the first glimpse of his slight figure hardly promised.

He was conqueror in scores of tilts, and vanquished foreigners went back to France to proclaim his chivalry to that court.

Then Louis wanted him, and Sordello was hastening across the Alps, when Ecelin da Romano called him to Verona. Here his young life was made wretched by Beatrice, sister of Ecelin. Prayers, tears, and swoons, however, did not prevent him from seeking in Mantua a refuge from an intrigue unworthy of his honor. She followed him to Mantua, disguised as a page, and in the end became his wife. A few days after the wedding, to which it can hardly be said that he consented, the Troubadour very naturally remembered that King Louis needed him. Partly at court, and partly in the ancient French city of Troyes, his valor, his gallantry, and his sweet verses won all hearts. Louis made him a chevalier, and gave him three thousand francs and a golden falcon. On his return, the Italian cities met him, one after the other, with stately congratulation, the Mantuans coming in a crowd to greet him. In 1229 he joined his wife at Padua, and that city celebrated his return by a whole week of festivity. From 1250 to 1253 the brother of Beatrice, Ecelin da Romano, besieged Mantua. At last the unwilling husband led the people out, and in the fray that followed Ecelin perished.

But this graceful story could not have been true. At the time when it asserts that Sordello went into France there was no Louis — only a Philip Augustus — on the throne. The siege of Mantua did not begin till 1256, and Ecelin died in 1259. His sister's real name was Cuniza. Perhaps Sordello told some such story of himself in one of the dancing rhymes he sung by the camp-fire. Very soon did such songs turn into history.

Rolandino, a Latin historian, born at Padua, in the year 1200, and therefore a contemporary, mentions the matter differently.

"Cuniza, wife of Richard of St. Boniface, and sister of Ecelin da Romano, was *stolen* from her husband," he says, "by one Sordello, who was of *the same family*." The ambiguity of this last phrase perplexed Tiraboschi, but would hardly deserve our attention if it had not furnished a hint for the modern poem. In Browning's hands, Sordello is no guilty troubadour, but the unwitting victim of political schemers, held as a hostage by his ambitious enemy, and that enemy a woman. Palma takes the place of Cuniza, but with no dishonor to her family. Rolandino adds that the pair took refuge with the father of Cuniza, who finally drove them forth in disgrace.

Dante, however, had something to say of Sordello which Browning has remembered.

At the entrance of Purgatory, in a spot where the impenitent mingle with those who have died a violent death, Virgil meets Sordello. "O Mantuan!" he cries; "I am Sordello, born in thy land." Dante here attributes to him "the lion's glance and port," and in his treatise "De Volgari Eloquentia" says that Sordello excelled in all kinds of composition, and that he helped to form the Tuscan tongue by some happy attempts which he made in the dialects of Cremona, Brescia, and Verona, cities not far removed from Mantua. He also speaks of a "Goïto Mantuan," who was the author of many good songs, and who left in every stanza an unmatched line which he called the key: and this singer Tiraboschi thinks is our Troubadour.

Benvenuto d'Imola, a commentator on Dante, of the fourteenth century, says, in a note to the sixth canto of the "Purgatory," — "Sordello was a native of Mantua, an illustrious and skilful warrior, and an accomplished cour-tier. This chevalier lived in the time of Ecelin da Romano, whose sister conceived for him so violent a passion that she often had him brought to her apartments by a private way. Informed of this intrigue, Ecelin disguised himself as a servant, and surprised the unfortunate poet, who promised on his knees not to repeat the offence. But,"

continues Benvenuto in forcible Latin, "the cursed Cuniza dragged him anew into perdition. He was naturally grave, virtuous, and prudent. To withdraw himself from Ecelin he fled, but was pursued and assassinated."

Benvenuto attributes to Sordello a *Latin* work, "Thesaurus Thesaurorum;" and if such a work ever existed we understand the sympathy with which the Troubadour embraced the knees of Virgil, — "O Glory of the Latins!" etc. Dante, at all events, thought of him as a patriot, and his outburst over the meeting colors the modern poem. That his poems were more philosophical than amatory was a still further appeal to the sympathy of the Florentine.

While Benvenuto was indignantly cursing Cuniza, some sketches of the Troubadour were written in Provençal, which say: "Born in the Mantuan territory, of a poor knight named Elcorte, Sordello early began to write the songs and short satires called in the language of that day *Sirventes*. He was attached to the Count of St. Boniface, and the lover of his wife, and eloped with her under the protection of her brothers." At war with the count, these brothers seem to have been rather more anxious to do him an ill turn than to protect their family honor. "Then Sordello went into Provence, where they gave him a château, and he became honorably connected in marriage," — Cuniza vanishing, we suppose, clean out of life, for she is named no more.

The lives of the Provençals, published by Nostradamus, in the sixteenth century, do not agree with the foregoing. They say Sordello was a Mantuan, who at the age of fifteen entered the service of Berenger, Count of Provence, and that his poetry was preferred to that of Folquet of Marseilles, Percival Doria, and all other Genoese and Tuscan troubadours. Beside writing philosophic songs, he wrote in Provençal an essay entitled "The Progress and Power of the Kings of Arragon in the Comté of Provence." Among his poems was one especially distinguished, — a satire, — in which, while lamenting the death of Blacas, he

burst into a philippic against all Christian princes. He died soon after this, in 1281.

Giambattista d'Arco attributes to Sordello several historical translations out of the Latin into the "vulgar tongue," and an original treatise on "The Defence of Walled Towns."

The memoirs of the early Italian poets by Alessandro Tilioli are still unpublished, but the manuscript only repeats the fable of Platina.

Tiraboschi, who had access to a very large number of manuscripts, rejects most of these splendid stories. According to him, Sordello was a Mantuan, born at Gotto, at the very close of the twelfth century. He went into Provence, but not when a boy. He eloped with the wife of his friend, Count Boniface. He was of noble family, and a warrior; but never a captain-general nor a governor of Mantua. He died a violent death, about the middle of the thirteenth century; but in 1281 he would have been a hundred years old!

And this ends the story. As we work our way through the old chronicles, it would seem at times as if there must have been two men, — one a warrior and a thinker, the other a singer only, — whose lives have become inextricably blended, and whose characteristics have bewildered the chroniclers by turns. But the shadowy old Podestà of Mantua, whom Dante is supposed to have remembered with Ghibelline sympathy, eludes observation even more successfully than the troubadour. If he ever lived, he must consent in this day to transfer his "lion port," his "Latin tongue," and "The Defence of Walled Towns" he put before the Mantuan council, to the graceless head of the idle singer.

The conflicting tales are only worth recalling because each fragment of them has had more or less to do with Browning's poem.

None of the prose translations, nor any poems, written

by Sordello in the Tuscan tongue survive. His verses in the Provençal are all that remain to vindicate his genius. Thirty-four pieces, for the most part gallant songs, challenge the statement of Nostradamus, — that he was devoted to philosophy. Two have been translated by Millot. The refrain of the first is, —

“Alas! of what use to have eyes
If they gaze not on her I desire?”

It is written in very pure taste. The second is a more ordinary affair. Three of the pieces are of the sort called “Tensons,” — that is, dialogues. One discusses the duty of a bereaved lover. The second compares the pursuit of knightly feats with the delights of love, and weighs the satisfactions of each. The third discusses “the bad faith of princes,” — a subject which he renews in an epistle addressed to St. Boniface. We should have but a poor opinion of his mettle were this epistle the only testimony to it; for he begs to be excused from joining the crusaders! He “is in no haste,” he says, “to enter on eternal life.” His other poems are *Sirventes*.

Many of them attack the troubadour Vidal. In these, threats mingled with insults, which become gross as soon as they are translated. Some, which relate to the moral and political aspects of his own time, merit our attention, and doubtless have furnished Browning with more than one pungent line. In one, the poet scoffs at those who, under pretext of extirpating heretical Albigenses, have banded together to despoil Raymond, Count of Toulouse. The Satire in which he entreats this prince not to submit to insult or rapine must have been written in 1228; because it speaks of the absolution just received by Raymond VII.

His best poem is his lament for Blacas, a Spanish troubadour of remarkable personal courage. It is a satire, and sovereign princes are urged to share between them the heart of the hero.

"Let the emperor eat first of it," says the song, "that he may recover what the Milanese have taken! Let the noble King of France eat of it, that he may regain Castile! but it must be when his mother is not looking!" etc.

This King of France was probably Louis IX., and the verses must have been written in the ten years preceding 1236.

The best of Sordello's verses show a dignity of composition and purity of taste which put him in the very front rank of the Provençals. His great hold on posterity consists in the fact that he *preceded Dante in the classic use of the vulgar tongue*.

It remains only to see what use Browning makes of this material. Into what shifty net did he weave these wide-floating threads of gleaming gold? It may be said at the outset that Sordello's power as a satirist seems never to have made the least impression upon him.

II.

THE POEM.

I DO not think that Browning knew what a problem he set before the world in *Sordello*. Perfectly at home in the Middle Ages himself, he had little idea that the terms "Guelf" and "Ghibelline" were actually obsolete, and that the small struggles of the old Italian courts had lost significance in the grand scope which steam engines, telegraphs, and newspapers had offered to the passions of men. We all know the story of Douglas Jerrold, who, waiting impatiently in his sick chair for his wife to get home from market, flung the first part of the Poem at her, with the words, "Read that!" She read; and he watched the expression of perplexed and puzzled imbecility steal over her face, till he threw himself back in his chair with the ejaculation, "Thank God! *I* am not an idiot."

The "Bells and Pomegranates" upon the borders of Browning's priestly robe, however, always ring out a noble peal. No more in *Sordello*, than in the better known and more popular poems, have we an unmeaning jingle of words over a meaningless glance into a dark past.

"Compassed murkily about
With ravage of six long, sad hundred years,"

Browning introduces *Sordello* to us. "Makers of new men," he says, —

"Had best . . . chalk broadly on each vesture's hem
The wearer's quality."

And then follows a page or two of reflection, so personal that we foresee faintly in *Sordello* such picturing of the modern poet as his ecstasy may betray him into.

Then the centuries open. It is sunset at Verona.

Frederick II. is Emperor of Germany. In the Pope's chair sits Honorius. Both of these men are trying hard to get Lombardy and the Northern Duchies. All Italy is harrowed with Guelf and Ghibelline swords. A highway into the very heart of battle-fields and vineyards is what France, Germany, and Italy alike demand; but who shall take the toll? Linger in the market-place, full of dying sunlight, and restless with busy talkers, we hear envoys from Ferrara tell how Taurello Salinguerra, Lord of Ferrara, has Richard of St. Boniface, Lord of Verona, in his hands.

Thus the matter fell. The Pope and his Guelfs were gaining power. Taurello and his liege Ecelin da Romano slumbered at their posts, faithful friends as they were supposed to be to Emperor and Ghibellines. Pretending that his presence only brought disturbance to Ferrara, Taurello left his city, and went to Padua.

No sooner was his back turned than the cowardly Guelfs seized his property, burned his palaces, and ravaged his gardens. They were drunk with conquest, under the command of Azzo, Lord of Este.

Suddenly Taurello was on their heels; all who escaped slaughter fled, and he, king-like, ruled once more in Ferrara.

Then Este rallied his Guelfs, and sat down before Ferrara, whose gaunt burghers ground their teeth to see the serried ranks encamp among their corn, while within the walls men fed on men. Taurello bade the Lord of Verona end the war. Like a foolish boy, St. Boniface offered to enter Ferrara with fifty chosen friends. A lonely march through woe-struck streets, and then Taurello sprung his trap, and all were prisoners.

The interests of the people lay with the Pope, those of the feudal chiefs with the Emperor; for him Ecelin of Romano still plotted like a fiend. A fiend it may be; but Taurello, who is childless and alone, still clings to his chosen liege, and plots for Ecelin, who, weary of a world

that refuses to be wound pliantly about his finger, is quiet at last in a convent at Oliero.

Here in Verona, where we listen, envoys demand succor for these fifty prisoners from the fifteen cities of the Lombard League.

The council of twenty-four sits in the palace of St. Boniface.

Gliding through "clapping doors," behind the dark recesses left by banquet halls, we come at last where, on a couch at rest, —

"Saturate with one woman's presence,"

"whose wise, lulling words are still about the room," we find our Troubadour. He is still listening to her "vesture's creeping stir," when an outcry from the square beneath pierces the charm.

He springs up, the morning light breaks on the gay dress, and we behold, —

"Sordello! thy forerunner, Florentine!"

Here, on the very night when the fate of the prisoners is to be decided, we see Sordello, the forerunner of Dante, into whose "relentless orb" the glory of the singer who *first* "strove to frame a Tuscan tongue" has been absorbed, and Palma, daughter of Ecelin da Romano, whom he loves.

He had been reared in Mantuan territory, a country one vast morass to that old city's walls. One little spot had been reclaimed thirty years before from that "broad marish floor." Goïto, a castle among low mountains shaded by firs and larches, and wide reaches of vineyard. Within, the castle walls are —

"Crossed by dark corridors, contrived for sin."

The galleries bring us to one fair maple-panelled room. A dim haze floats along its wall. A sunbeam strikes it, turns

it to gold, and shows us Arabian inscriptions there, while pillars, like slender palms whose boughs entwine, —

“Bend kissing top to top.”

Still more wonderful is a vault, with murky shade about its ceiling. Fine slits across the buttress suffer fitful light to fall upon a gray streaked font, supported on all sides by shrinking Caryatides.

“The font’s edge burdens every beautiful shoulder.”

And here at evening Sordello used to come, sitting by each fair form in turn, till the cheerful light slanted in among the noiseless girls, and kindled faint smiles on the marble lips with its red beams. Nowhere has Browning left a more exquisite picture than this. We hate to turn from it to the hill-tops, vineyards, or the little wood where, in a loose page’s dress, we find the boy again. In autumn watching the thievish birds, in winter holding his torch up to the brodered arras, gleaming with strange portraits of the old Lord of Romano, of Ecelin and his many wives, “weird Adelaide” coming last, for whose vile incantations the Arabic letters nestle among the palms in the maple chamber, —

“Yourselves shall trace

A soul fit to receive

Delight at every sense; you can believe

Sordello foremost in the regal class

Nature has broadly severed from the mass.”

And then Browning meditates for a page or two on the poetic temperament, in a fashion which shows very plainly how little it is for its own sake that the portrait of Sordello is started out of that old wall of —

“Six sad hundred years.”

Scorn of the world’s indifference shuts the minstrel into solitude. If the world’s occasion is not fit for his mastery, and he will not strive for the good of mankind, enervate

he must grow. If the end must be piteous, he says at last, let us shut it out of sight, and begin gently to twine the threads of the young poet's life.

Sordello never could remember when he did not live at Gorto. Youth had glided calmly by in this secret lodge of Adelaide. Nothing did he know of a world beyond those forest glades. The castle seemed empty, but he wandered there at pleasure.

Some mysterious interdict, shutting him out of the Northern side, was just enough remembered to keep him near the font, the maple chamber, or the breezy parapet which overlooked Mantua.

A dozen distant hill-tops were his only clew to the world. He lived in delicious indolence, tended by a few foreign women, blending his life with that of land, sea, flower, bird, and insect. "Content as the worm that strips the trees," he exhausted each day's delight. Like him, also, hung in a hammock web of his own sporting fancies, he would yet put forth wondrous wings in quest of unforeseen good.

Selfish he must grow, his moral life utterly undeveloped. Weary of merging his own life in that of poppy and linnet, he began to feel the need of other lives. Vanity put forth her claims. He vivified the forms in the old tapestry. Streams of life-like figures flowed through his brain. He lived the life of each, and studied hungrily his own puppets. He compared his life with that of the grim warriors on the arras. "Will no career open for him also?" Those men were older, his call was yet to come, so comforted, if not careless, he waits on. Meanwhile he finds —

"The Apollo in his soul."

On a "colorless faint tune" he began to hum the songs of Eglamor, and out of the heart of Nature wrung —

"New verses of his own."

He fancies himself surrounded by soft Delian girls, — among them, too, a Daphne.

It was the common talk at this time that Azzo, Lord of Este, who had so lately ravaged Taurello's houses and gardens at Ferrara, should secure the fealty of St. Boniface, whom Taurello had just shut up with his fifty chosen friends, by giving him the hand of Palma. Palma was the sole child of Lord Este's sister, Agnes Este, who had married Ecelin da Romano, before any "weird Adelaide" had caught him in her toils, and "turned him wicked."

So far the maiden had defied the toils of state. No modern Michal she!

One day Sordello met her in the pines, with her tresses falling round her like "shed sunbeams." He learned then, perhaps, why he had been shut out the Northern wing; but to his thinking —

"She who scorned all, best deserved Sordello!"

Did he grow pale for her, or for that delayed career?

Taurello had lately been at Mantua. So long Adelaide lingered at Goïto. As soon as he departed, as if relieved of some secret care, she had returned to the capital, where troubadours were gathered to sing before her of the glories of Romano.

Why did Adelaide keep guard at Goïto whenever Taurello drew near? She did not distrust her husband's friend. It was Taurello who helped her to goad Ecelin on, and the fortunes of the two had grown, till Este and St. Boniface had begun to falter.

One warm spring day long years of life like this were broken up by an accident, which ushered in —

"The veritable business of mankind."

The Second Book of the Poem opens here. Sure that Palma must be out under the warm heaven at this budding time, Sordello wandered witless over the marshy floor, where every footfall sent up a sparkling jet. The verge of a new wood was gained. That screen of trees must surely "yield her to his eyes." He pressed on, in jealous rage of

that Boniface he had heard some talk of, but lo ! Mantua this time, and not Palma.

Under its walls, and near a pavilion, a gay and laughing crowd are clustered. By and by, the silken curtains open, and not Boniface, but his minstrel, comes forth to sing his wooing.

Naddo strings a lute for Eglamor, who sings of Elys. In the soul of Sordello a deeper music murmurs. Many a gap in the song does it supply. His heart throbs with longing to speak. Before the shouts which follow have died away, with no heed to those who twitch at his sleeve, Sordello springs into the crowd, beginning —

“ The *true* song with the *true* end.”

Names, time, and place he stole from Eglamor. On flew the song, a giddy race after a flying story. Rhyme sprang on the back of rhyme. The people crowded round, —

“ The prize ! the prize !! ”

They shouted. He had gained something then ! and into a soft slumber would gladly have sunk with that rosy dream floating through his brain.

At that moment the crowd opens. He sees Adelaide sitting silent, and at her feet the maid of the North Chamber.

With just six words Palma laid the scarf upon him, warm with her own life. Her golden curls kissed his cheek.

He knew no more till he woke, some furlongs off at home, crowned, — with that scarf about his neck, and curious women kindly gaping round.

The Jongleurs Naddo, Tagliafer, and Squarcialupe had brought him back.

Poor Eglamor was dead of sorrow. Already trumpeters proclaimed that Palma had chosen Sordello for her minstrel.

Sordello, who had hitherto *perceived*, now began to think, and naturally enough, of his own poem.

How had they come to feel its beauty who had never, like him, "threaded the golden mazes" of Palma's hair with the hand?

Low mournful footsteps broke his reverie. Some friends led by Naddo were carrying the body of Eglamor to the grave, a few loose flowers in its hand. Eglamor loved his art. He stood faltering before it, like the Perseus, who hid the naked beauty of Andromeda with her golden hair.

His new song had been dear to him, but he shouted for Sordello with the rest, and bending to lay his withered crown beside the fresh one, left tears and a kiss upon the singer's hand. Nay! he even sang, at the careless bidding of bystanders, the very song with which Sordello had outshone him; then went home.

His little knot of friends were already with the rising star, the new Sordello.

Hot, weary, puzzled by his uncertain future, he slept, and did not wake.

They found as much who went to gossip heartlessly before him of Sordello's life and song.

Sordello laid his fresh crown upon the dead man's breast, and in sweet song besought Nature still to hold him dear.

The prayer was not bootless.

A plant, which bears a three-leaved bell, that ripens to its heart ere noon, its soft, pure petals falling noiseless as the last breath of the Trouvère, still bears the name of Eglamor.

In May, Sordello lay once more beneath the flowing laurel, wondering why the old castle hid so the secret of his birth.

Years before, when a factious mob hung reviling on the skirts of Ecelin's army, he in anger set all their homes on fire, forgetting for the moment that his wife was sheltered among them. There in the flames, did Adelaide give birth to Ecelin the younger, and the babe was rescued from the mob by a poor archer, named El Corte. There was no one

left to thank, when they thought of it years after, but his young son Sordello.

This child Adelaide carried to Goito, a retreat which the bad woman kept for herself when times were rude, when Este clamored for Palma, or Taurello, who had lost all his family in those dreadful flames, came to the Mantuan court.

This was the story that Sordello knew, and he mused on it, losing sight of that "Apollo in his soul."

Crazed by his sudden fame, what need had he to square his course by any known example? He would be mighty for Boniface, he thought, and graceful for Palma, as he six times read over Naddo's lines, entreating him to visit Mantua and "feed a famished world." Naddo was Sordello's henchman now.

Far more did Sordello care for the fame which waited on his verses than for the verse itself. Under Apollo he sang for the smiles of his Delians. *Now* the rhymes were Eglamor's, and Naddo chuckled.

Looking back now, it is easy to mark the source of the Troubadour's power. He seized the elements of the hour, and made them the puppets of his muse. If Sordello sang of Montfort, straightway Montfort's name was on every Mantuan lip; but who spoke of Sordello?

"He footed a delusive round :
The poet thwarting hopelessly the man."

Quiver and bow he flung aside, striving with the lute alone for the Mantuan world's applause. The Man-Poet, John's "cloud-girt angel," was gone.

It was too tedious, he thought, to give a life-time to the answer of such questions as Naddo's stupidity might suggest.

His soul, no longer seeking to compass the whole world of Truth, saw in the tithe it had compassed less and less to strive about.

"Would you have your songs endure?" asked Naddo,

taunting him : " then build on the human heart." Dreams and reality both failed him here.

Meanwhile the world rejoiced that sudden sickness set it free from Adelaide.

On her death Ecelin writes to his friend Romano, that three weddings are to put an end to Guef and Ghibelline strife.

His two sons, Alberic and Ecelin, are to marry Beatrice d'Este and Giglia St. Boniface, while Palma is to be given to Count Richard, as the old rumor said.

If interests can but be sufficiently mixed, perhaps that great highway between France and Germany and into Italy may be forgotten by everybody.

Ecelin was at Vicenza. His letter found Taurello at Naples, sworn to sail next month with the Emperor for Syria. " Never thunder-clap so startled mortal ! " — " She to die, and I away ! " exclaimed Taurello, and half a score of horses dropped under him ere he stood, with reeking spurs, before his liege at Vicenza.

" Too late ! " said Ecelin, panic-struck when he saw reproach in his ally's face. " Boniface urged and Este would not wait ; but you have still my Palma. Be satisfied to keep that lure, only forgive ! "

Taurello hastened to Mantua to make sure of Palma. The gay city called on Sordello to chant the soldier's welcome, — upon Sordello, grown too indolent to be faithful, and taunted daily now with the success of his first song. Naddo goaded him, and he wandered away to see what power there might be in the cool shades of Goito. Out of the depths of the ravine he catches at last a glimpse of the old walls.

Palma had gone that day, said the few remaining women. Kneeling by the old font, among the shrinking maidens, he put off his scarf, threw in his crown, and said with a long smile, " I shall be king again." Next day there was no poet.

Taurello frowned. Naddo whispered of caprices that

must be borne, and his lord settled his portly frame again, and looked toward the bull-fight.

The Third Book opens with Sordello still at Goïto.

"And the font took them. Let our laurels lie."

So they did "lie" for more than a year. Sordello haunted his old nooks, or slept in the maple chamber.

“The stain
Of the world forsook him — with its pain.”

“Slide here
Over a sweet and solitary year,
Wasted —
He slept, but was *aware* he slept,
And frustrate so.”

"Deeds let escape are never to be done."

"Leaf fall, and grass spring, for the year, not us."

Wondering why he had ever left Mantua, he wandered home one autumn day. The clouds, those everlasting travellers, slipped over him, *onward*. He was dreaming of Palma, of lost chances and duties, but dreaming consciously, perception self-perceiving. On this mood broke the voice of Naddo:—

“Taurello sent”—

Then out rushed the news of the double marriage, and of Ecelin's retirement to a convent at Oliero. He had bribed the Pope with a slice of his estate, had divided the rest between his two newly married sons, and left all the tangle of his affairs for Taurello to unravel. Only a week since, Palma had plighted her faith to Boniface at Verona. They wanted Sordello perhaps to chant the bridal songs!

Promptly Sordello rose, which was more than Naddo had hoped. Another day—a night, and Sordello reached Verona, saw it as we saw it at the beginning of the poem.

Uneasy crowds fill the market-place. The Emperor Frederick only waits to be sure that his friend Taurello is firmly seated in Ferrara to wage the old war with the Pope.

Descending as the head of the Lombard League, he will reburnish the traditional glory of Charlemagne.

Sordello and Palma have found each other at last. While the council discuss the condition of the fifty prisoners, they sit with hands close interlocked, the tumult in the square never checking the quick, low laughter in their dim closet, till at last in burst a servitor of Palma :—

“Now, lady!”

Then the two arose and leaned out into the night, all the air “dead still.” In a moment the black balcony beneath them glares with torches, and gray-haired men stand there shouting to the crowd. The swaying masses lay hold of the great bell, whose fierce clang asserts that the League is arming and Verona true to her lord. Beyond the eastern cypresses, a beacon glows; before its light grows dim, soldiers under Tiso Sampier are to march through that open gate. Boniface is to be saved.

With a coy, fastidious grace, Palma settled to her place again, and told her tale—at first the tale of her own youth.

Nothing had she known at Goito, except a longing to be loved; nor would she loose the powers within her until she knew whose hand would control them.

“Because of him,”

she said,—

“The wind walked like a herald.”

But she had never known him till the hour when she laid the crown upon Sordello’s brow beneath the walls of Mantua. Adelaide, her step-mother, had gone on scheming. Now and then Ecelin, weary, baffled, disheartened, would have been ready to give it all up, and fight the world once more in his father’s downright way; but an hour with Adelaide had always reassured him, and how then could Palma push the fortunes of Sordello?

On the wild night when Adelaide died, she had broken out into terrible confessions of treachery and sin. She

was taken at last in the midst of a half-uttered secret. Her sons were gone in anger, her husband in Padua, Taurello on the way to the Crusades. While her "fell dying laughter" still rung on Palma's ear, Ecelin broke in.

"Girl!" he said, "how shall I manage Este?" Then he declared it did not matter, for he would plot no more, master of all the marches as he was. Soon he bestirred himself to undo the dead woman's work, — undid her pacts, broke her marriages, bent his head before a friar, gave all his money to the church, divided his estates between his boys, and shut himself into a convent!

No thought took he for Palma. While she schemed alone at Goïto Taurello came. He urged her to maintain the honor of her house against the house of Este; told her of that great ancestor, old Ecelo, who followed Conrad into Italy, with no wealth but his steed.

"Este needs the Pope," he said. "We of Romano have the Emperor," and promised his own help.

So Palma went to Mantua, let Boniface think his wooing prosperous, and Taurello waited until some new Papal folly should give him room.

Palma was a daughter of Este. Some day might see her rudely claimed. She had been plighted on the very day of the outbreak at Ferrara, when the fifty were made prisoners, and when she went to Verona to fulfil her troth, her impatient lover was on his way to the siege.

"Surely *his* absence was not Palma's fault?"

To her drivelling father at Oliero Taurello wrote once more. Through Palma the answer came. His two boys were already in arms for Este. Palma might represent Romano if she would, and stand by Taurello's emperor!

All this Palma told Sordello in that dim closet where we found her. "Judge now," she continued, "if I misconceive — and whether the Emperor's cause is not your own. To-morrow, well disguised, let us precede the arbitrators to Ferrara. Taurello will decide the rest."

"The Emperor's cause his own!" but had not Sordello

long ago decided that he was to fight for the *people with the Pope?*

Browning stops here to tell you *why* Sordello yielded ; tells you sitting on a palace step at Venice, where he wrote the tale, — falls into a reverie (a very lazzarone of Parnassus) ; draws pretty pictures in his own delicious way ; drops an episode about Plara the bard, and a few cutting thoughts of his own, not forgetting, in the red light of the sunset that he sees as he sings, how his main object in writing Sordello is —

“To teach the poets.”

“Where’s the hurt

To keep the Makers-See on the alert?”

The fourth book opens.

Ferrara lies in rueful case. Both parties are too intent upon their fight to see that life has left her, and that the victor would at best embrace a corpse.

The eastern Lombard cities have sent imperial envoys down to treat for Richard’s ransom. The Papal legates have come also, looking in vain for the throng of graceful spires wont to pierce the sky, but gone long ago to mend the ramparts. They are to be received when the Emperor’s envoys have departed. The various banners of the League flaunt gay and golden in the public square, and gossip goes on beside them. Men speak low, as if Ecelin might listen at Oliero, but we overhear what Taurello would gladly hide.

It is through a garden which Taurello planted long ago, to please his girlish bride Retrude, that the envoys at last move off to ask for ransom. In the streets hot curses fall on Ecelin and Taurello alike. Browning turns from both to touch in every square inch of this garden, from its red brick wall, with aloes “leering everywhere,” to the terraces which lift straight to the palace gate. There stand Sordello and Palma, in disguise. Sordello trying to believe the Emperor’s cause *may be* the “peoples’ ;” both waiting for the two imperial legates to leave Taurello.

After an hour in that council-chamber, the poet staggers out, older by years, blind, mute, as singers must be who forsake the Muse.

Night sets in early. Mass begins at every "carroch." When the poet crouches beside the fire where Verona halts, voices demand a song, — Sordello's song. He sings it, with a remorse that quivers through the tones in which he says, "*I made it.*" At the close, a boy, nay, Palma, takes his hand and leads him out.

Let us go back to Taurello's council-chamber at the moment when Sordello entered it.

Before him lay a baldric, new, sent from the Emperor in honor of his stratagem. Somehow the stupid eyes of the Papal legate had missed it. Beside this was the message brought from Ecelin by Palma.

"What a past life his flying thoughts pursue!"

There was no name so old as his in Mantua. Somewhat later his ancestors had carried it to Ferrara.

The broils of his own family, the Salinguerri, and that of the Adelardi, divided the whole duchy. It was proposed to unite the interests of the two by the marriage of Taurello and the last daughter of the Adelardi, now the ward of the city. Taurello honorably waited for the decision; but the people of Ravenna stole the girl, and bore her forcibly away to Este. Boniface defended the rape. Taurello carried his strong sword to Sicily, and Henry King of Sicily was glad to repay its services by the hand of his fair child Retrude. When Taurello drove the forgetful Este out of palaces that were none of his, he built a new one — untainted by an Este's touch — with green Sicilian gardens for his bride. This fair young creature, with her first-born child, had perished in the flames that Ecelin kindled at Vicenza.

He was calm, men said, but from that time he had no fortunes left to further. He became a true liegeman to Ecelin and Adelaide, and sought honors for the house of Romano instead.

Henry offered a new bride, a statelier function, but in vain. Otho saw a warning sparkle in Taurello's eye, and learned —

“ He must be let alone.”

He had no “ideal of the graces,” yet all the graces seemed to follow and cling to his brawny person. He spoke languages, criticised pictures, and even played the *angelot* to his own rhymes ; but, continues the poet, —

“ Why

Detail you thus a varied mastery,
But that Taurello, ever on the watch
For men, to read their hearts, and thereby catch
Their capabilities and purposes,
Displayed himself, so far as displayed these ;
While our Sordello only cared to know
About men, as a means for him to show
Himself, and men were much or little worth,
According as they kept in or drew forth
That self.”

During all these years Taurello had kept his treacherous enemies, Este and Boniface, at bay. As Ecelin grew old many things had changed, and but for Adelaide the house of Romano had fallen long before. It did fall before the sod was green upon her grave. Denied all counsel by her cowardly lord at Oliero, Taurello had again assumed *his* duties. Success attended his arms : —

“ He had to fight,
And that became him ever.”

His old half-laughing hate for the house of Este began to show itself.

He mused. Shall he turn traitor to Ecelin's heir, or crown him in his own despite ? What wonder that he mused, as the poet says, “ *murkily* ” ?

Palma and Sordello stand now at midnight, alone, by a smouldering watchfire.

Sordello pleads with Palma. “ *Is there any People's cause at the bottom of Taurello's deeds ? What meant his heartless tone to the imperial envoy ? the excuse preferred for burning the five hostages ?* ”

Palma admits that both parties seem to her to strive alike for their own selfish ends.

"My thought plainer expressed," Sordello answers. "If *I* have done nothing, *these two do far worse*. Yet a noble hope lured me hither. Lapped in a merely sensuous life, God left me still the poet's one hope and thought, — that there was a cause beyond these, and that he, in spite of my unworthy youth, deemed me fit for its upholding."

An archer pressed between them to ask for a song, the story of Crescentius Nomentanus. Sordello did not even know the name!

Then the archer tells how, born of the counts of Tusculum, Crescentius once established a pure and peaceable government in Rome, two centuries before. He had maintained it for eight years, crucified at last by the brutal Emperor, Otho III., who gave over his wife to the soldiery.

Sordello heard. Rome, hung with the green drapery that grew at Goito, with the misty light of Mantuan sunrises and sunsets, the guerdon for which popes and emperors had always striven, Rome was the poet's cause! Should he find *Romans* fit to do his work?

With the night falling, the fifth book opens. Is this 'perished husk' the glowing champion we saw at dawn?

"Things proved beautiful
Could they be done, Sordello cannot do!"

And he sits there on the terrace, gathering and snapping in his powerless hand the powdery cusps of the aloe.

"So perish, loveliest of my dreams."

He had found no help, — no Romans among Ferrara's squalid sons.

A low voice wound into his soul: —

"Sordello, wake!
God has conceded two sights to a man, —
One, of men's whole work, Time's completed plan;
The other, of the minute's work, man's first
Step to the plan's completeness.
Who began the greatnesses *you* know?"

The beautiful, pungent verses roll on here, revealing the deep, manly purpose of the poem :—

“Strength by stress
Of strength, comes of a forehead confident,
Two widened eyes, expecting — Heart’s Content !”

“Is ’t so true
God’s church lives by a king’s investiture ?”

As he muses, the clang of the carroch breaks on his ear.
“All ’s well with the League.” “The League, or trick of turning strength against pernicious strength,” is safe :—

“Still by stress
Of strength, work, knowledge ! Full three hundred years
Have men to wear away in smiles and tears
Between the two that nearly seem to touch !”

“But all is changed the moment you descry
Mankind is half yourself.”

Little wonder that, seeing so far as this, the poet shrank beneath his singing, grew miserable in sympathy with the poor maimed wretches in Ferrara streets, idiots wriggling about the camp-fire for their bread, or men gangrened from head to foot by accident of catapult, or mangel.

“Since talking is your trade,”

whispered the voice again, —

“There ’s old Taurello left you to persuade.”

Shaking the aloe haulm from his doublet, Sordello rose, and went straight to the presence of his chief.

The great head turned. “So !” said Taurello, closing some talk with Palma, —

“Your spokesman is El Corte’s son ?”

The hesitating sunset floated back awhile, to caress the woman’s form — perhaps to strengthen the man’s heart.

Sixty years of warfare had not made Taurello old. Graceful turned the head on his broad chest, encased in steel that sent back that lingering light in spray of fire.

Among the heavy curls of soft, warm brown, you could see the sharp, white line the basnet wore.

"Square faced,
No lion more; two vivid eyes enchased
In hollows filled with many a shade and streak."

No wonder that a certain awe faltered through the tongue of the poet boy : —

"Yet most Sordello's argument dropt flat,
From his accustomed fault of breaking yoke —
Disjoining *him who felt* from *him who spoke*,"

In which three pregnant lines is struck out the source of all failure under the sun !

Pleading, he watched the faces of both. Taurello, playing with his rescript, scoffs ; then Sordello knew by a flash how the dreams of his long youth had eaten away his strength. Having lost earnestness, how could he hope to convince ? Yet he went on : —

"Assist the Pope,
Extend his domination, fill the scope
Of the church based on All, by All, for All."

Taurello broke the silence with a jeer : —

"Who 'll subscribe
To a trite censure of the minstrel tribe,
Henceforward ?"

But, says Browning here, —

"Whom vanity nigh slew, contempt shall save !"

Within Sordello's soul perception brooded. All that he had stored there through his life outpoured : —

"That eve was for that age a novel thing."

About that group of three the people crowded, and while, like an inspired creature, Sordello vindicated the kingliness of the poet, —

"The roof upsprung,
The sad walls of the presence chamber died
Into the distance, —
And crowds of faces clustered round Sordello
With good wishes, — no mere breath, —
Kind prayers for him, — not empty, since come Death,
Come Life, he was fresh sinewed every joint."

The rosy mist the sunset kindled kept a space about the poet. We see the picture as if Rembrandt had painted it.

"So was I" (closed he his inculcating,
A poet must be earth's essential king!)
"So was I, royal so, and if I fail
'Tis not the royalty ye witness quail,
But one deposed, who caring not exert
Its proper essence, trifled malapert?"

Did the "Makers" read this lesson, I wonder, when Brown-
ing first gave it to the world?

The poet went on: —

"At my own showing
A single service I am bound effect,
Nor murmur. Bid me still, as poet, bow
Taurello to the Guelf cause — which
I labor for this eve, who feel at length
My past career, outrageous vanity,
And would as vain amends, die — even die,
So death might bend Taurello."

"Palma's lighted eyes
Turned on Taurello, who, long past surprise,
Began, 'You love him then!'"

and went on to recapitulate all the adversities of the last month, — the treachery of Romano, — ending with a taunt. Perhaps Palma might wear the badge the Prefect left — or, should Sordello wear it for her?

Jeeringly he threw the baldric over the poet's shoulder. He had trifled once too often. No sooner was it done than all felt through the terrible pause that followed some dim perception of the truth: —

"This badge alone
Makes you Romano's head;
For you there's Palma to espouse,
For me one crowning trouble."

Then Palma told, —

"Somewhat Adelaide confessed,
A year ago, while dying on her breast."

Flying in the terrible night when her son Ecelin was born, her convoy was for a moment wrapped in the flames that destroyed Vicenza.

There, unharmed by fire, but wounded and lying on her face, lay Retrude, covering herself and her child with her own golden hair.

While Adelaide gazed, Taurello's successful war-cry broke on her ear, and roused her jealous hate. She bore them away, — a wavering smile flitting about Retrude's face showed that she felt no pain, till, as they neared Goïto, —

"A few tears
Slipped in the sunset from her long, black lash,
And she was gone."

They laid her in the font which had been Taurello's gift, by the meek, marble mourners. Afraid that her husband's dawning power would be checked by the ambition of Taurello, if he knew his son were living, Adelaide gave out that the child was El Corte's son.

Taurello raves and listens, babbles of what may be when, far away in Naples, he may defy the Emperor if he will.

" 'Embrace him, madman ! ' Palma cried,
Who, through the laugh, saw sweat-drops burst apace,
And his lips blanching. He did not embrace
Sordello, but he laid Sordello's hand
On his own eyes, mouth, forehead.

Understand
This while Sordello was becoming flushed
Out of his whiteness," —

till, struggling, mute, he signed for both to leave him.

"Nay, the best's behind,"

Taurello raved, playing with his sword, as if he would still hew new paths with that. Palma took off his iron hands, one by one, from Sordello's shrinking shoulders, who, —

"Loose, rose to speak, then sank ;
They left him in the chamber,"

while Palma led Taurello forth. The leader kept up his mad talk. But he would go no farther than the dark gal-

lery below, where he sat in silence, shivering the stone bench with his truncheon.

For the sake of talk, Palma began a rhyme of Sordello's, and told how all men praised him : —

“ The foolish praise
Ended, he drew her on his mailed knees, made
Her face a frame-work with his hands, — a shade, —
That done, he kissed her brow,”

and broke into wild plans of vengeance, “ Not fit,” he said, —

“ Be told that foolish boy ;
But only let Sordello Palma wed,
Then ” —

He set her in the ragged jet of fierce gold fire the still westering sun shot through a grating, and paced the passage with clenched hands and head erect, — such “ lion's port and countenance ” as Dante gives Sordello when they meet.

Nowhere in literature is there a grander descriptive passage than that which follows.

Palma, whom Dante spoke with, sat — as he called her — the “ votary of passion,” knowing that her work was done. Taurello was wildly pacing the dim gallery, when a sound in the chamber they had left stopped the very breath of both.

“ Your hand ! ”

demanding Taurello ; and forth they two reeled dizzily, the man — as Palma remembered, and told long after, dropping a few insignificant words, —

“ As though the spirit's flight, sustained thus far,
Dropped at the very instant.”

Sordello sat alone where they had left him, —

“ While evening sank
Down the near terrace to the farther bank,”

in a reverie which holds in urns of fiery beauty the very marrow of the tale.

He questioned all the shifts and changes of his life,
seeing clearly —

“How he had been without a function.”

“Could he forsake himself in serving All?
How piteously little at best must his service prove!
He would dash
His badge to earth and all it brought, — abash
Taurello thus.

Before
He dashes it, however, think once more,
For was that *little* truly service?

“Death
Tempts ere a tithe of life be tasted.

Live
First, and die soon enough, Sordello!
Our road is one,
Our times of travel many, — if slow or fast
All struggle up to the same point, at last.
His time of action, for, against, or with
Our world, grew up that eventide,
Gigantic with its power of joy, beside
The world's eternity of impotence
To profit, though at *all that joy's expense*.”

“Oh! it were too absurd to slight
For the hereafter the to-day's delight;”

and he lives over in fancy all the state and delight of life
to which that Prefect's badge entitles him! How empty
it all seems!

“Eternity his soul
Exceeded so was incomplete for, each
Single sphere, Time. But does our knowledge reach
No further?
*Must life be ever just escaped which should
Have been enjoyed?*”

“Never may some soul see All,
The Great Before and After and the Small *Now*?
Here is a soul whom to affect
Nature has plied with all her means, from trees
And flowers, e'en to the multitude, and these
Decides he save or no? One word to end!”

Quick! what has Sordello found?

“For they approach, — approach! that foot's rebound.”

Those whom that dull, strange sound disturbed below
follow upon his last grand thoughts. They reach the
threshold, throw back the tapestry :—

“ You divine who sat there dead ?
Under his foot, the badge. ‘ Still,’ Palma said,
A triumph lingering in the wide eyes.”

“ And as Palma pressed
In one great kiss her lips upon his breast,
It beat.”

They laid him beneath the font by Retrude’s side.

Is it possible to care how the history went? Yet
Browning pauses to tell us, and the facts may carry their
lesson.

Taurello emerged from misery and married Sofia da
Romano, the last daughter of old Romano in the convent,
who bears him so many sons that when it is said, “ Tau-
rello’s son died ere his sire,” men ask, which one of Sofia’s
five is meant. Ecelin and Alberic played with their great-
hearted brother-in-law, as old Romano had done before.
Ecelin took Verona, next year Vicenza, and Taurello’s little
boy inquires when he may be “ his own proud uncle’s
page ?”

Years rolled away ; one fatal day Taurello meddled with
the marine of Venice :—

“ So Venice
Captured him at Ferrara,”

and none being very angry with the old man, they carried
him to Venice for a show.

“ It took this Ecelin to supersede that man,”

The fathers, pointing, say to their children ; and this sad
fate befalls because Sordello had not faith to live, but left
Ecelin to—

“ Prove wherever there is will
To do, there’s plenty to be done, or ill
Or good.”

Ecelin perished in his wars ; Alberic was trailed to death
by a wild horse, “ through ravine and bramble-bush.”

These pieces swept off the board, Browning turns back to Sordello :—

“Is there no more to say?”

The chroniclers of Mantua tried their pen, telling how Sordello saved Mantua, and elsewhere nobly behaved; and so the Troubadour passed with posterity for just the god he never could become :—

“The one step too mean
For him to take, we suffer at this day
Because of: Ecelin had pushed away
Its chance ere Dante could arrive and take
That step Sordello spurned, for the world's sake:
Dante did much, Sordello's chance was gone.

He was chiefly glad
To have achieved the few real deeds he had,
Because that way assured they were not worth
The doing.

A sorry farce, such life is, after all.
Sleep and forget, Sordello! In effect
He sleeps, the feverish poet, I suspect
Not utterly companionless; but, friends,
Wake up; the ghost's gone, and the story ends!”

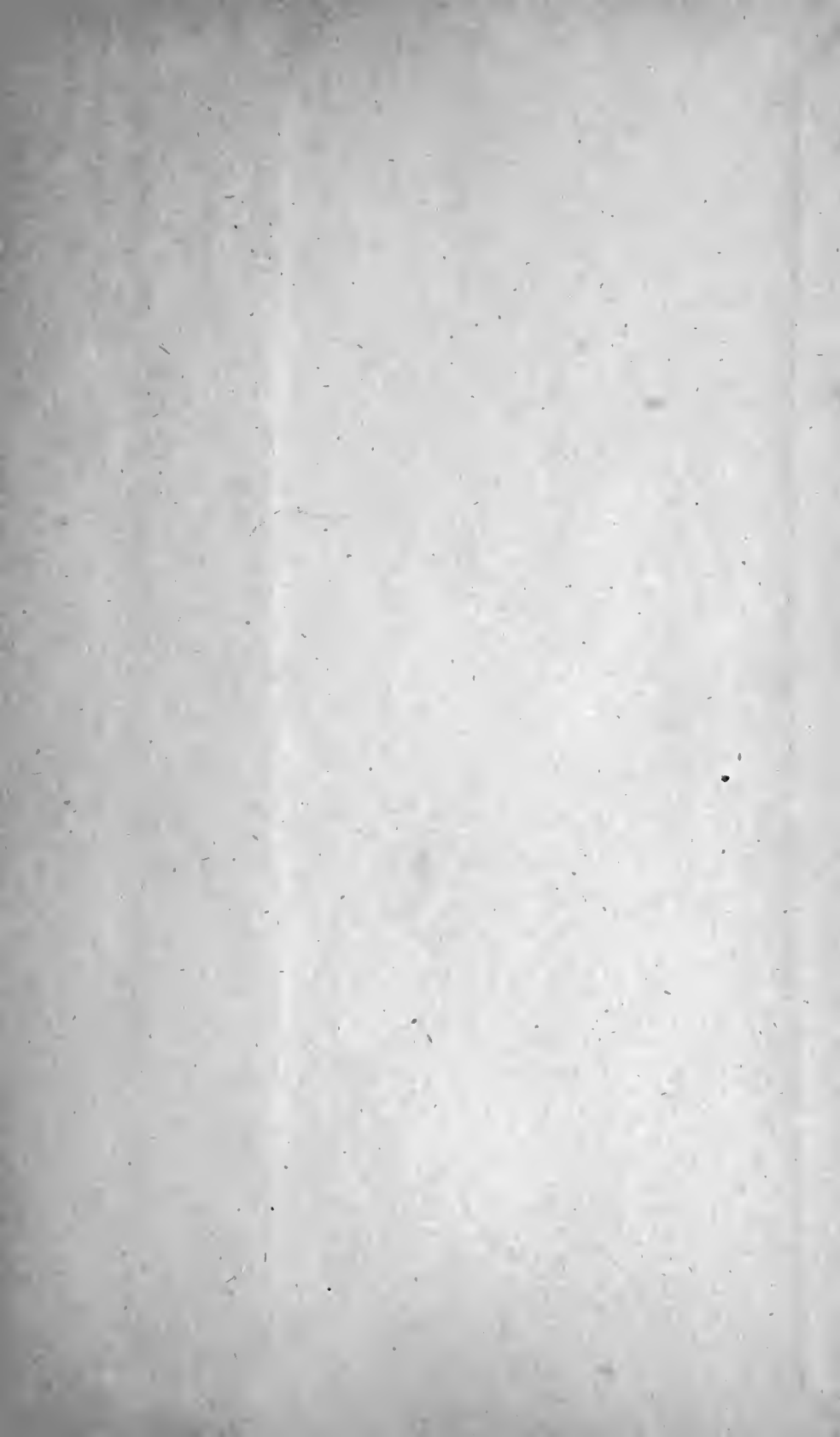
SORDELLO:

A HISTORY AND A POEM.

By CAROLINE H. DALL.



BOSTON:
ROBERTS BROTHERS.
1886.

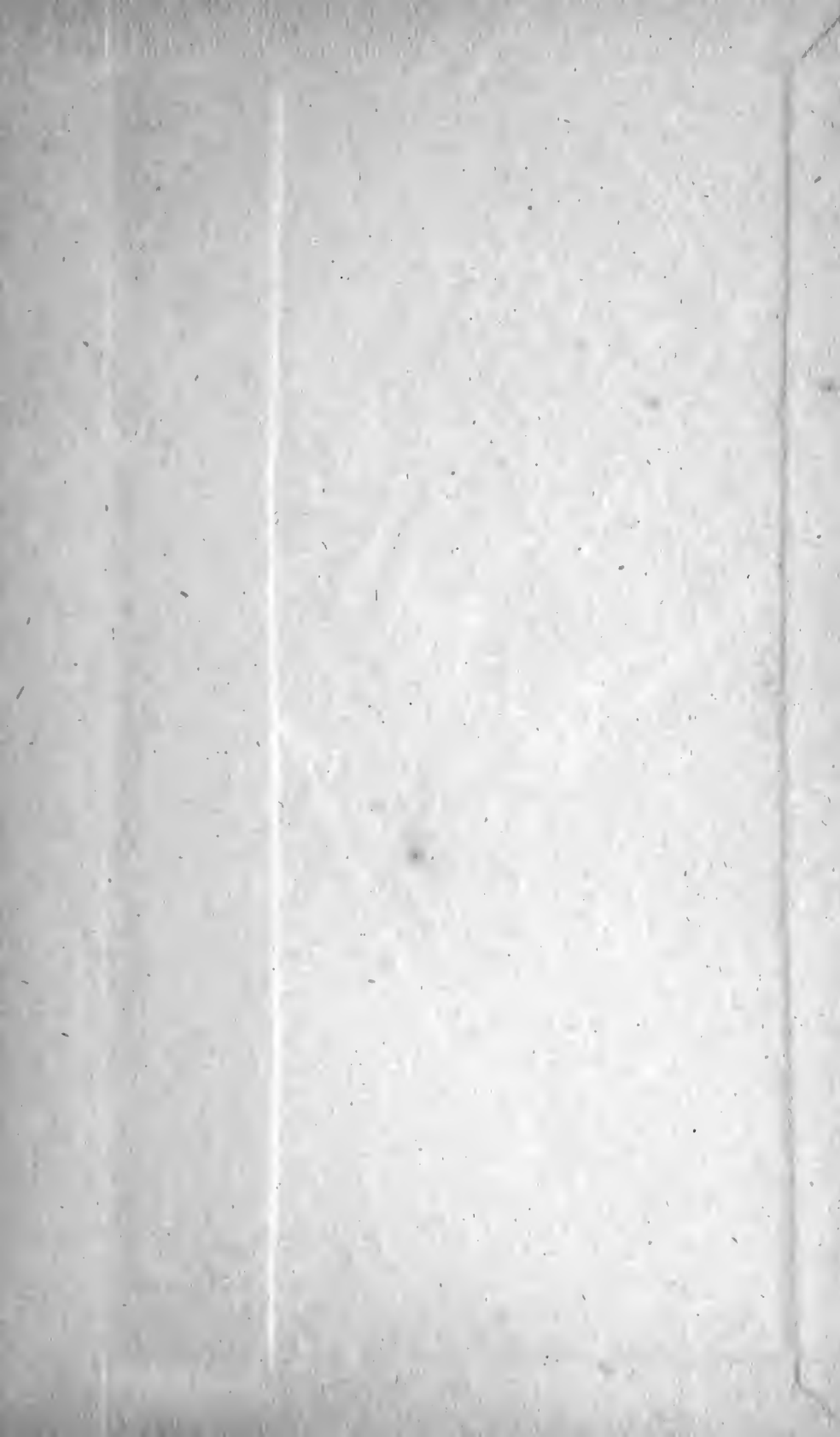


Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide
Treatment Date: March 2009

PreservationTechnologies

A WORLD LEADER IN COLLECTIONS PRESERVATION

111 Thomson Park Drive
Cranberry Township, PA 16066
(724) 779-2111



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 014 386 812 6